

The history of translation

How has translation evolved?



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The Path to Open Communications

Can translation be regarded as a fundamental contribution to civilization and to the development of all cultural and intellectual life?

I would say, yes! Would you agree with me? Yes? No? Ok, let's see: Translation has always been about sharing. Yes, sharing. With translation we share all sorts of information, and without translation we would have no history of the world! Can you imagine living in this country (or any other country for that matter) without knowing what is happening in other countries or places, be it South or North of the border or overseas? It is well known, or we could say that it goes without saying, that different countries have different languages, and that only a handful of countries in the world share a common language. Some countries even have more than one official language - Canada and Switzerland being two of them. So, what do people do to communicate in these countries?

Countries that have more than one official language have always seen, and continue to see, a need for all its inhabitants to communicate appropriately, especially in government matters, without forgetting legal, security, education, medical matters, etc.

For this **communication** to happen, the different languages need to be translated into the others. Communication leading naturally to better understanding and progress, it is also undeniable that translation is, and has always been, closely related to progress - the awakening periods in the history of nations having started with translations.

But how did translation come to be about?

We have all heard the story of the Tower of Babel, where people with one common language decided to build a tower where they could feel safe and not be scattered upon the face of the Earth. But God came down and scattered them upon the face of the Earth, and confused their languages ([Genesis 11:5-8](#)). Nevertheless, the narrative of the Tower of Babel is an etiology explaining the origins of the multiplicity of languages, not necessarily the origin of translation.

It has been suggested, though, that interpreters must have existed during prehistoric times; that is, before writing was invented. This is explained most probably by the many different meanings of the Greek word for translator/interpreter, *Hermēneus*. Later on, ancient Greeks had different words for *metaphrase*, or **literal translation**, and *paraphrase*, or **saying in other words**.



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In **ancient times**, communities engaged in international trade, exchanging in this way ideas and observations. When returning travelers, who knew several languages, though not necessarily read them all, were unable to read the classical written word in their language of origin, the translation of classical scriptures became necessary. Also, when communities spoke different languages, in Babylon for example, official proclamations were translated into those languages in order to communicate with the subjects. Translation showed two orientations in ancient times, '*sense for sense*' and '*word for word*'.

About his approach to translation, Cicero has been quoted as having said:

"If I render word for word, the result will sound uncouth (strange), and if compelled by necessity I alter anything in the order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the function of a translator."

(Citation from Basnett-McGuire 1980: 43)

One of the first recorded examples of translation was that of the *Septuagint* - a collection of Jewish Scriptures - in Alexandria, between the 3rd and 1st centuries B.C. The Rosetta Stone, with its trilingual version (hieroglyphic-Egyptian, demotic-Egyptian, ancient-Greek) of the same decree, dates back to the 2nd century and is a non-religious **icon of the art of translation**.

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Other relevant translations in antiquity were those of the works of *Plato* and *Protagoras*, and other classics, translated into Latin by *Cicero*, as well as the translation of the New Testament by *Saint Jerome*, from Hebrew into non-literary Latin.

In 9th century Baghdad, Arabic was a new target language for an immense job of translating scientific and medical content from Greek and Syriac. The House of Wisdom was a major intellectual center and key institution in the Translation Movement, during the Islamic Golden Age.

During the **Middle Ages** we find translations from Greek into Arabic, such as the works of *Hippocrates*, *Plato* and *Aristotle*, between the 8th and 9th century A.D.; from Arabic and Syriac into Latin (the *lingua franca* - or working language - in the 11th and 12th century), after the invasion of Spain by the Moors; from Sanskrit into Telugu between the 11th and 13th century A.D.; and Arabic versions of Greek scientific and philosophical classics into Latin - helping thus to advance the development of European Scholasticism. West Saxons also saw the translation of books into **languages everyone could understand**.

During this time we can also find translations from Italian, French, and Latin into English. It was during the 14th century that the Bible was translated into English by John Wycliffe. During the 15th century John Purvey prepared a comprehensible, natural version of the New Testament so that everybody could understand it.

The **Renaissance** saw the Latin translation of *Plato's* works by Marsilio Ficino in Italy, as well as that of the New Testament into Latin and Greek by Erasmus. A superabundance of translations, mainly from Greek was also observed.



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In England and elsewhere, scientific and religious texts were translated into vernaculars (native languages), promising then access to the Latin culture. In India, Sanskrit was translated into Bengali, enabling in this way the understanding and control of the subjects by their rulers.

With the rise of Protestantism, Martin Luther translated the Bible into High German. In England, William Tyndalle translated the Old Testament from Hebrew and the New Testament from Greek into English. George Chapman translated *Homer's Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Batrachomyomachia* into English. In India, many Sanskrit classics were translated into other Indian languages like Assamese, Bengali, Malayalam, Marathi and Oriya. Étienne Dolet, French translator and humanist, formulated the first fundamental principles of translation in 1540.

The 17th century saw an abundance of Greek, Latin and French classics translations into English, progressing "beyond mere paraphrase toward an ideal of stylistic equivalence". During this period three types of translation were identified, *metaphrase*, *paraphrase* and *imitation*.

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How has translation evolved?

During the 18th century translators strove for "ease of reading", omitting in this way whatever they did not understand in the text or whatever they thought would be boring to the reader, though the idea, the style and manner of writing and the case of the original work were nonetheless emphasized by Alexander Fraser Tytler in 1791. At the end of this century, much interest was shown by the British East India Colonial administrators in the languages, literature and culture of their subjects, and the discovery and translation of ancient Indian works was highly encouraged.

The 19th century saw an abundance of translations from a variety of languages into English, like the translation of Goethe's work from German into English, and the translation of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (a collection of poems) from Persian into English. The Bible was also translated into hundreds of languages all over the world, and many English books and texts were translated into various Indian languages. It is worth noting that word lists and grammatical descriptions of the languages of inhabitants of European colonies were prepared, which eventually facilitated the translation of the Bible.

In the late 19th century Dr. Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof invented **Esperanto** (meaning 'one who hopes'), an international auxiliary language for peace and progress. Zamenhof's goal was to create an easy-to-learn and politically neutral language that would foster peace and international understanding between people with different regional and/or national languages. According to Zamenhof, he created this language to foster harmony between people from different countries [wiki]. Despite the 10,000 to 2,000,000 speakers of this language, Esperanto has not been officially adopted by any country.

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In the **20th century** translation was viewed as a social action by religious and political forces, with many societies and organizations being created and fostering Bible translations into many different languages, including those of primitive and tribal societies. By the second half of the 20th century accuracy and style was the main criterion in translation.

The political arena of the **20th century** saw translations as a political mission, and highly political content was translated from Chinese, Russian, and other Asian and European languages into English, as well as from Canadian French into English and vice versa. It is worth noting that the translation of sexual and religious content in China began in the 80s, and was well received, despite its discouragement during the Cultural Revolution.

The **20th century** also saw the development of translation research products, such as Machine Translation and *Computer-Assisted Translation* (CAT) tools, which continue to be used and improved to this day. CAT tools include specialized programs and aids, such as grammar and dictionary software, translation memory, terminology management, text search tools index/concordance, quality check, alignment programs statistical tools, etc.

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Conclusion

The **history of the world** and the **history of translation** being closely entwined, there is no doubt that most of the world's past comes to us through translation.

All throughout history, translation has enabled the dominant social groups to understand and control the dominated social classes; it has also allowed these lower classes to have access to otherwise unattainable writings that have contributed to the enrichment of their knowledge, as well as changing people's lives and perspectives, regardless of social class or standing.

In modern times, the advancements in technology, the need for instant global communication, and the never ending migration of people around the world confirm the everlasting importance and necessity of translation as a tool for economic, political, cultural, religious advancement.

"Translators have invented alphabets, helped build languages and written dictionaries. They have contributed to the emergence of national literatures, the dissemination of knowledge, and the spread of religions. Importers of foreign cultural values and key players at some of the great moments of history, translators and interpreters have played a determining role in the development of their societies and have been fundamental to the unfolding of intellectual history itself."

("Translators through History", Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1995)





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How has translation evolved?



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OCTOBER, 2011

VOL. #1 ISSUE #6

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*– Casey Charlton
Glyph Language Services*

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